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ABSTRACT

In the fall of 1993, six faculty at SUNY Plattsburgh launched what they called the "Looking for America Freshman Semester," a program or course cluster of 16 credit hours in American studies, including anthropology, history, literature, philosophy, composition, and library skills. The core assumption underlying this effort was that writing is learning. Students in the program wrote about 30 papers of varying length during the semester, about 4 or 5 times what the average freshman writes. Curious to learn what students thought they had gained from their writing in the course cluster, one instructor asked his literature students to include in their portfolios the best essay they had written that semester--one not written for his class. Six of the students selected essays written in freshman composition; four of these were on personal topics having nothing to do with American studies. Three of the four expressed gratitude for the opportunity to write about personal topics. The two composition assignments that did relate to the American studies topic did so in surprising ways. One asked students to write about a personal experience with prejudice; the other asked for a short story which helped the student to understand writerly choices. This metacognitive experiment helped the instructor to appreciate the newness of cultural relativity from the perspective of a freshman, and to appreciate anew the importance of English 101. (TB)

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ED 379 681

Writing and Learning Across the Curriculum in the "Looking for America" Freshman Semester

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In the fall of 1993, six faculty members at SUNY Plattsburgh launched what we called the "Looking for America Freshman Semester," a program or course cluster of 16 credit hours of introductory course work in American studies, including anthropology, history, literature, philosophy, composition, and library skills (one credit). Our idea was to create a learning community of students and faculty who would be studying American culture from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. ENG 101 was included because we intended that the students would write a lot and that writing instruction would be a benefit to them. Furthermore, the ENG 101 instructor had had experience in teaching clustered courses. As the English department WPA at the time, I saw the inclusion of Composition as a way to contextualize the course, to give it a subject matter and an immediate and apparent purpose: to help students write papers in the other courses. Furthermore, the course could be taught in a computer classroom, giving students access to E-mail (we did, in fact, do a lot of electronic communicating).

The core assumption underlying our efforts was and is that writing is learning. The students in our program wrote about 30 papers of varying lengths during the semester, four or five times what the average freshman at our college writes. Several interdisciplinary assignments were developed so that students could write for more than one instructor simultaneously, thereby encouraging them to integrate material from several courses and to consider the implications of writing for multiple audiences.

Curious to learn what the students thought they had gained from their writing, I required a portfolio in my literature class, one entry in which was to be a short essay about the writing assignment (other than one written for my class) from which each student had learned the most. I directed them to include the original essay but indicated that I would not grade it; thus, a student was free to choose

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a paper that had earned a low grade as long as she could show that writing it had been a significant learning experience.

I expected that many students would select one of the interdisciplinary essays we had so laboriously planned; after all, we had conceived of them as major learning opportunities. However, I was surprised by the results of my admittedly unscientific experiment in metacognition. Of the 29 students who actually completed all six courses, only three wrote about assignments prepared for more than one instructor. Just under half (14) selected an essay from the anthropology course, Comparative Cultures. Of these, six chose an imaginative assignment in which they were asked to speculate on whether the human race had progressed in the last 10,000 years. Most of the 14 said that writing the anthropology papers had forced them to look at their own culture objectively, something they had never been asked to do before.

Six students selected essays they had written for ENG 101. Of these essays, four were on personal topics that had nothing whatever to do with the Looking for America experience. After so many years of teaching freshmen, I should not have been surprised that four students would be far more interested and willing to write about their internal struggles than about issues related to the semester's academic theme. As many readers of the *Chronicle* know, ENG 101 is a place where surprising and miraculous things can and do happen, a place where students learn not only about usage but about the relationship between thinking and writing, consciousness and expression. Several of the four who wrote on personal topics expressed gratitude that they had been given the opportunity to explore personal issues through writing.

The two ENG 101 assignments that did relate to the American studies curriculum did so in surprising ways. One was an assignment in which the instructor had asked students to write about a personal experience with prejudice. A student wrote about not being allowed to go on an exciting amusement park ride with her taller peers because she was too short and how remembering this humiliating event helped her to understand the frustration of bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. She never claims that height discrimination is equivalent to racial discrimination—she knows better than to say that. Her point is that writing about her personal experience gave her a surprising entree into a novel. The second metacognitive piece, entitled "How Writing Helped Me Better Understand What I Read," is a commentary about how writing a short story for ENG 101 helped a student understand the writerly choices in Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*. The student writes, "What I did not take into account is that this assignment may be a chance to see what steps an author has to take when writing a story. This is eventually what this assignment did for me." I don't think that there is anything I could have done in my literature class that would have been as effective in helping this student see the fiction writer's craft from the inside.

"Looking for America" was repeated and expanded in the fall of 1994 and will continue next year as well. The lessons I learned from the exercise in metacognition in the portfolio assignment helped me to better understand the difficulties and opportunities involved in a writing-intensive interdisciplinary freshman program. First, there is the newness to students of the idea of cultural relativism. The provocative assignments in Comparative Cultures challenged students to view their culture from a new perspective. Many were clearly surprised that such a perspective existed. I was

surprised at how surprised they were. Second, my appreciation of the importance of ENG 101 was enhanced by seeing that one out of five students believed that a single piece of work in that class was the most important they did all term. Even though they were writing in every class (a unique experience for freshmen at most colleges today), these students saw ENG 101 as the environment in which they used writing to learn about themselves and the curriculum. Finally, the portfolio reinforced for me the importance of metacognition. Even after 30 papers, a student could express surprise at how important her writing actually was: "I don't think I would have gone back and read any of my early writings and essays if it were not for this assignment. I would have just dismissed them as assignments. . . I have grown so much in the last 3 months that I don't think I could ever think like I used to."

Having twice had the opportunity to watch students develop as writers and thinkers across the curriculum in the Looking for America semester, I have, even after 25 years of teaching writing, developed a new appreciation for the complex and indispensable role of writing in student learning. Knoblauch and Brannon write in *Rhetorical Traditions in the Teaching of Writing* that "the growth of students as writers is not the same as the improvement of texts" (151): how right they are.